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Focusing the *It's Time* Urban Mission Initiative

Following the *Mission to the Cities* emphasis during the current quinquennium from 2010-2015, the 2013 Annual Council of the Seventh-day Adventist Church chose another large city evangelism initiative called *It's Time* as the special emphasis during the next quinquennium from 2015-2020. As presented in the document voted during that Annual Council, this urban mission initiative has a three-part goal:

1. Engage the collective resources of the global church in establishing a Seventh-day Adventist presence and needs-based ministry in cities of 1 million or more that have no Adventist congregation.

2. In all other cities of 1 million or more, to improve the ratio of members and worshipping groups to population.

3. Ensure that divisions and their organizations, including local churches, give higher priority to the growing challenge of urban mission in their territory (see *Mission to the Cities Website 2013:2* for the complete document).

Approximately 500 cities around the world have a population of one million or more (hereinafter called “*It's Time Cities*” and abbreviated as “*IT Cities*”).¹ Actually, rather than being single cities, these are what is referred to as “urban agglomerations.”² Of these 500 *IT Cities*, 43 (9%) have no Adventist churches (see Figure 1). These *IT Cities* are the focus for the first part of the goal. While not providing specific criteria for the second part of the goal, the enabling document suggests the criteria may involve the ratio of Adventists to population or the ratio of Adventist congregations to population and suggests that at least 100 *IT Cities* will be focused on under parts one and two of the goal. Part three of the goal expresses the desire to see local churches, administrative units of the church, and church-owned organizations “give higher priority to the growing challenge of urban mission in their territory.” No metrics are suggested for measuring this and therefore this part of the goal is more aspirational than specific.

Based on Research

Adventist Mission and General Conference personnel, led by Rick McEdward and David Trim, conducted research in July 2013 to gather data regarding the number of members, churches, and other types of church institutions in these 500 IT Cities around the world. This is perhaps the first time the church has based widespread evangelism plans on actual data gathered since the church adopted the “population segment” approach for mission assessment in 1989 (Morgan 2014:135-149). This is an encouraging development that should be affirmed and followed up with additional evangelistic targeting that is intentional and based on solid data. If the objectives of this urban mission initiative are carried out, genuine progress will be made.

However, to see this progress and know that it is really progress, the three-part goal laid out in the enabling document needs more specificity in any actual working documents.

What does it mean to establish “a Seventh-day Adventist presence”? By what percent should divisions improve their member to population ratio? That is, what will be considered success in each division? It may even have a different percentage in each division. It should also be noted that this objective aims at hitting a moving target. The population in 2020 will not be the same as what it will be in 2015. Therefore, objectives should be developed on the basis of what the population is projected to be in 2020.

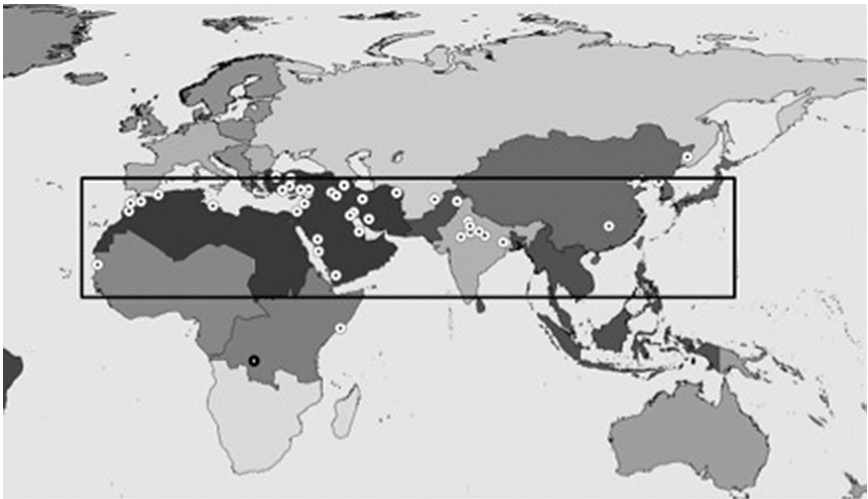


Figure 1. It's Time cities that have no Adventist congregation. Areas are shaded by division and Middle East-North Africa Union Mission (MENA). The rectangle indicates the nominal extent of the 10/40 Window.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of IT Cities without an Adventist congregation. All but one of these cities is found in the 10/40 Window countries as listed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The one exception is the city in the Democratic Republic of the Congo indicated by the black dot with a white center in Figure 1. Therefore, the unreached IT Cities problem is an unreached 10/40 Window problem. More than this, it is really an unreached MENA problem. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the unreached IT Cities are within the boundaries of MENA. If you add India, the total unreached IT Cities reaches 84%. This readily reveals where in our world the challenge of unreached cities is found.

Membership–Population Distribution

To obtain a more complete view of the status of Seventh-day Adventist urban evangelism around the world, in this article, I will look at the task in a slightly different way. How closely does church membership distribution in all IT Cities reflect the general population distribution? That is, is the proportion of total church membership found in these IT Cities similar to or different from the proportion of total general population found in these same cities? For example, in the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division (SID), 19.3% of the total general population of the division resides in IT Cities. By comparison, only 11.7% of the division's total membership resides in these same cities. That's a 7.6% point spread. Proportionately, nearly 8% fewer Adventists are found in the division's IT Cities than the percentage of general population found in these same cities. That is a significant difference, but as will be noted, there are even greater differences elsewhere.

This kind of information will indicate at least two things. First, it will give an idea of how urbanized a division is, and second, it will provide an indication of how "balanced" evangelistic outreach is in a particular division. In SID, about one-fifth of the division's general population lives in IT Cities. That's a fairly low urbanization rate. It should be understood that the general population also lives in cities of *less* than 1 million but which are still large enough to be considered "urban." Nevertheless, this gives a useful urbanization comparison indicator between divisions of the church.³

Table 1 lists the 13 church divisions plus MENA and gives key population and membership data. It is sorted by general population from the largest to the smallest.

Table 1. World Divisions and Major Cities Comprehensive Data⁴

Division	Population	Membership	Number IT Cities	IT City Population	IT City Membership	IT City Pop. %	IT City Mem. %	Difference
Northern Asia-Pacific Division	<i>1,595,299,000</i>	661,852	105	<i>405,630,000</i>	198,250	25%	32%	-7%
Southern Asia Division	1,290,638,000	1,607,108	51	178,066,000	113,238	54%	7%	7%
Southern Asia-Pacific Division	962,419,000	1,175,324	41	202,190,000	194,063	21%	17%	-4%
Middle East-North Africa Union	496,113,000	3,150	48	148,475,000	2,303	30%	73%	-43%
West-Central Africa Division	367,922,000	871,227	26	64,545,000	165,440	38%	39%	-1%
North American Division	344,130,000	1,132,233	54	169,280,000	492,569	58%	43%	15%
Inter-European Division	339,490,000	177,166	31	79,505,000	35,958	23.6%	20.3%	3.3%
East-Central Africa Division	329,754,000	2,704,468	10	31,920,000	205,275	9%	8%	2%
South American Division	318,470,000	2,101,991	34	132,230,000	681,629	41.5%	32.4%	9.1%
Euro-Asia Division	317,264,000	120,351	28	62,470,000	20,565	20%	17%	3%
Inter-American Division	290,898,000	<i>3,672,440</i>	35	101,570,000	<i>694,256</i>	36.2%	19.3%	16.9%
Trans-European Division	202,316,000	82,769	19	49,435,000	27,339	24%	33%	-9%
Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division	171,095,000	2,623,304	9	32,925,000	341,279	19.3%	11.7%	7.6%
South Pacific Division	36,211,000	396,192	6	15,910,000	37,647	44%	90%	34%

The Northern Asia-Pacific Division (NSD), which includes China, has the largest general population, which is in bold italicized type. In each succeeding column of information, the top-ranked division's data is in bold italicized type. The last column has two numbers highlighted, the lowest and the highest.

Notice several points. The North American Division (NAD) is the most urbanized of all divisions with 58% of its population found in cities of 1 million or more. The second most urbanized division, the South American Division (SAD), is 17 points lower with about 41% of its population found in these large cities.

While MENA currently has 73% of its membership in these large cities, there are two reasons why we should not be concerned at this point. First, the total membership compared with the total population is so small, the numbers are practically irrelevant. Second, the great majority of current members are guest workers from other countries rather than citizens of the countries of MENA. The church has yet to root itself in the soil of MENA. Therefore, leaving MENA aside for now, NAD has the largest percentage (43%) of members in the large cities, which is not surprising given its degree of urbanization.

The last column in the table is especially interesting because it shows how closely church membership distribution reflects the distribution of the general population. For instance, in SAD where about 32% of the Adventist membership is found in IT Cities, about 41% of the general population is found in these same cities. This is a 9-point spread, a significant difference, meaning comparatively more church members are found in rural (smaller cities and rural)⁵ areas than in these large cities. By contrast (leaving MENA aside), the division with the largest point spread in the other direction is the Trans-European Division (TED). In the TED, 9% more of the Adventist membership is found in the large cities than in rural areas.

A study of the figures in this last column suggests several things. First, about half the divisions have a point spread of less than 5%. This suggests these divisions have balanced efforts in evangelism, that is, a balance

between urban and rural evangelism. Approximately another half of the divisions tilt toward rural areas in membership and presumably their evangelism focus. These divisions have a positive point spread greater than 5%, suggesting a greater emphasis on urban evangelism is needed. One division, TED, tilts toward higher membership in large cities rather than in rural areas, suggesting it needs a greater emphasis on rural evangelism.

Needed Evangelism Emphasis

Based on this assessment, a summary of *general* evangelism emphasis should perhaps be as follows:

Division	Balance	Needed General Emphasis
East-Central Africa	About right	Keep it up
Euro-Asia	About right	Keep it up
Inter-European	About right	Keep it up
Northern Asia-Pacific	About right	Keep it up
Southern Asia-Pacific	About right	Keep it up
West-Central Africa	About right	Keep it up
Inter-American	Tilts toward rural	More evangelism in large urban areas
North American	Tilts toward rural	More evangelism in large urban areas
South American	Tilts toward rural	More evangelism in large urban areas
South Pacific	Tilts toward rural	More evangelism in large urban areas
Southern Africa-Indian Ocean	Tilts toward rural	More evangelism in large urban areas
Southern Asia	Tilts toward rural	More evangelism in large urban areas
Trans-European	Tilts toward urban	More evangelism in rural areas

Figure 2. Needed evangelism emphasis.

Please note that this is a suggested *general* emphasis at the *division* level. An assessment at the union or local field level might well suggest a different emphasis for individual unions or local fields. Certainly, in divisions where there are large cities with few or no members (as is the case in NSD, ECD, and some other divisions), these cities should be the recipients of special attention and evangelistic work whatever the overall division emphasis might be.

A more detailed assessment by each division is needed in order to pinpoint what emphasis is needed where (more evangelism in urban areas or more evangelism in rural areas). In addition, church leaders should take into consideration the ethno-linguistic make-up of the existing membership and compare it with that found in the general population of a city as part of the evangelism targeting and planning. "One-size-fits-all"

evangelism will not move the church to where it was commissioned to go (Rev 14:6), but careful assessment and planning will, under God, put the church on vantage ground.

Notes

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all data in this article come from or are based on information found in the datasheet compiled by Adventist Mission personnel in preparation for launching the It's Time initiative in 2013. The process of refining and revising data in the spreadsheet is an ongoing process and thus some slight inaccuracies may be found in this article due to underlying inaccuracies in the original data. However, if such inaccuracies do occur, they should be reasonably small and have little or no bearing on the overall conclusions drawn.

²"Refers to the de facto population contained within the contours of a contiguous territory inhabited at urban density levels without regard to administrative boundaries. It usually incorporates the population in a city or town plus that in the sub-urban areas lying outside of but being adjacent to the city boundaries." United Nations definition of "urban agglomeration" found online at http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Documentation/WUP_glossary.htm (accessed April 12, 2014). Technical definitions of urban agglomerations may differ in various countries, but this UN definition provides a good working definition.

³The whole subject of "urbanized" is one that needs closer study in order to correctly interpret urbanization statistics. For instance, in the United States urbanization is determined by a fairly complex algorithm based on population density at the census block group level. Because of this, places that most people would hardly consider "urban" are technically classified as urban areas because they meet the population density criteria. I doubt that most people living in my hometown of Berrien Springs, Michigan would consider our village of 1,800 as urban. However, based on its population density, it is classified as an urban area in the United States. Therefore, when we hear statistics of how urbanized a country is, we need to know what is considered urban and how it is determined.

⁴Two church entities did not report some data in time to be included in this assessment. I have removed the involved cities' data to yield more accurate results.

⁵For the purposes of this paper, rural means any cities less than a million plus rural areas. Obviously, many of these cities would be considered urban, but the main point here is to compare and contrast city agglomerations with a population of 1 million or more (It's Time Cities) with the rest of the population.

Works Cited

- Mission to the Cities. 2013. It's Time: The Urgency of Urban Mission. <http://missiontothecities.org/resources-for-leaders> (accessed 20 October 2-14).
- Morgan, Clyde. 2014. Measuring Our Mission Progress. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 10, no. 1:135-149.



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